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STATE FOR EUR/NB AND G/TIP

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SUBJECT: POSSIBLE GEORGIAN TRAFFICKING CONNECTION WORRIES  
FINNS

Classified By: POLOFF DAVID ALLEN SCHLAEFER FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) and (D)

1. Summary:  
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(U) Finland's National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) and Frontier Guards announced on March 7 that they believed as many as 1,500 Georgian women may have been trafficked through Finland to destinations scattered throughout western Europe from 2002-2004. According to the NBI, the operation was run by a Russian organized crime syndicate that arranged for busloads of women to enter Finland under the guise of tour groups. The women had previously obtained Swedish and Italian tourist visas in Moscow, and had told Finnish Frontier Guards that they were transiting Finland on their way to their vacation destinations. Several days after this announcement, Finnish Frontier Guards intercepted a busload of 48 Georgian women attempting to enter Finland at the Valimaa checkpoint along the Russian-Finnish border. The women were taken to a refugee reception center; four men that were with the group were detained on suspicion of trafficking-in-persons. Finnish authorities attempted to handle the case in a manner consistent with Finland's soon-to-be-published new anti-TIP National Action Plan (emphasizing victim's rights). However, the subsequent investigation indicates that the women were not involved in sex trafficking, but in labor trafficking or labor smuggling. As the women refused to cooperate with Finnish authorities and asked to return to Georgia, Finnish authorities arranged a chartered flight to Thilisi (the Russian Government reportedly denied them transit en route home). This case has served to heighten Finnish public awareness of trafficking, and has caused both officials and editorial writers to comment that perhaps the GoF has erred in past statements that trafficking is not an issue in Finland. End Summary.

A Rude Awakening  
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12. (U) The GoF in the past has often maintained that trafficking-in-persons is not a significant problem in Finland. This attitude has slowly changed over the past two years, as evidenced by the Finns enthusiastically hosting with Embassy Helsinki a major conference on child-trafficking in 2003, an OSCE conference on victim assistance in 2004, and a NATO conference on combating TIP just two weeks ago. Finland has also passed legislation making TIP a criminal offense (Fall 2004) and is on the verge of publishing a new National Action Plan aimed at creation of a victim-centered approach to trafficking-in-persons. Concurrent with these initiatives has been a growing recognition that there are women trafficked to and especially through Finland, and that trafficking may exist where before Finnish authorities saw only organized prostitution or smuggling. Nonetheless, revelations over the past two weeks of large-scale trafficking of Georgian women has caught Finnish authorities off guard and served as a rude awakening to many in the Finnish public.

13. (U) Finland's FBI-equivalent, the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI), announced on March 7 that as many as 1,500 young Georgian women may have been trafficked through Finland to destinations in Western Europe. It is thought that many of these women were destined to work as prostitutes in the red light districts of cities such as Brussels, Amsterdam and Berlin, although some have been part of labor trafficking or smuggling operations. In each case, the women entered Finland at the Valimaa checkpoint along the Finnish-Russian border on the road from St. Petersburg. They had Georgian passports with visas from either the Italian or Swedish Embassies in Moscow, and had represented themselves as tour groups to the Frontier Guards at the border checkpoint. The Guards let the buses pass since the women possessed valid travel visas for EU countries in the Schengen area. However, the Frontier Guards recorded the bus's registration and license plates. Subsequently, Greece reported to the EU that tour buses were leaving Greece for "return trips" to Georgia with only a handful of passengers on them. Finnish authorities, taking note of the Greek report, confirmed that these were indeed the same buses that had earlier entered Finland from Russia full of female

passengers.

14. (U) The announcement garnered considerable media attention in Finland. The Helsingin Sanomat, Finland's major daily newspaper, ran an editorial acknowledging that the State Department's TIP report had been correct in pointing out that trafficking was a problem in Finland. The paper wryly commented that the U.S. appeared to know more about what was happening at Finland's border than Finns did. Major Ilkka Herranen, a regional Commander in Finland's Frontier Guard, told the press that the Georgia revelations gave reason to reconsider Finland's official position on trafficking. According to Herranen, "In the past, (Finnish) authorities have generally refused to see Finland as a country of transit or destination of trafficking human beings. Now we have to admit that Finland is at least a transit country and possibly a country of destination to some extent."

#### Another Busload -----

15. (U) Only a few days after the initial announcement about the possible Georgian trafficking connection, a busload of 48 women and 4 men was intercepted at the Valimaa checkpoint by the Frontier Guard. The bus was registered to a Swedish tour agency, and the passengers fit the profile of the previous incidents. The women all had valid visas issued by the Swedish Embassy in Moscow. A man claiming to be a tour guide told Finnish authorities that the women were on a chartered tour with a destination of an inexpensive "Italian market" for shopping. When asked why they were entering Finland, the man said their itinerary was Tbilisi, Moscow, Helsinki, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Germany, Austria, Italy, Greece, Turkey, to Georgia, but was unable to provide any explanation for the roundabout trip. The women had little money, and many seemed to have no idea what their itinerary was, although they all appeared to have been coached to state that an "Italian market" was their final destination. The Frontier Guards detained the four men on suspicion of trafficking-in-persons, and took the women into protective custody.

16. (U) In the past, the Frontier Guard would normally have denied entry to the women and turned the bus back around toward Russia. However, in anticipation of a new GoF National Action Plan on trafficking aimed at creating a victim-centered approach to TIP in Finland, the Guards took the women to a refugee-asylum center run by the Ministry for Labor in Joutseno, also along the border but some 150 kilometers north of the Valimaa checkpoint. Consultations among the MFA, Labor, Interior, and Social Affairs ministries led to an early decision to treat the women as trafficking victims and open an investigation into the case. The Finnish press widely reported that the women were presumably being trafficked to work as prostitutes elsewhere in Western Europe. However, the subsequent police investigation determined that it was more likely the women were being trafficked or smuggled for labor; most of the women were in their 30's, 40's and 50's, and none of them were younger than 26 (the oldest being over 60).

17. (U) The women declined to provide details of their situation to investigators and repeatedly asked to return to Russia, despite assurances that they would not be deported if they wished to cooperate with investigators and remain in Finland. After one week in the reception center, the Interior Ministry determined that there were no grounds to, in effect, keep the women detained against their will in Finland. Since Russian authorities refused to grant transit rights for the bus to drive to Georgia, a chartered flight was arranged to return the group to Tbilisi. According to Finnish authorities, Georgian media was reporting that the women were prostitutes bound for Western Europe. A Finnish official accompanied the group on the return flight to discuss the investigation with Georgian authorities and to dispel the Georgian media's notion that the women were sex workers so that they would not be stigmatized upon their return (a fear that some of the women had expressed). The detained men were released for lack of evidence.

#### Learning Curve -----

18. (C) The exact nature of the current case remains unclear; Finnish police report that since they could not ascertain the conditions in which the women would have been working had they not been intercepted, they are unsure if the case involves trafficking or smuggling of illegal immigrants. The case did afford the Finns an opportunity to test new procedures for investigating trafficking, however. Coordination among the various Finnish agencies involved was not always smooth. In particular, senior officials at both the Labor and Foreign Affairs Ministries told Poloff that they were disappointed with the reaction of the Ministry for Social Affairs and Health (MSAH). Finland's new National Action Plan calls for the MSAH to play a key role in victim

assistance. According to the MoL and MFA, the MSAH "hid behind a lack of resources" and refused to take responsibility for the Georgian women; this refusal led to the Labor Ministry's offer to shelter the women at the asylum reception center as long as necessary. The head of Finland's inter-agency TIP working group still believed that such difficulties were to be expected, and that the GoF had learned valuable lessons from the case about the need for better communication and coordination among the affected agencies as well as about interview techniques with the women and their handlers. Interior Minister Rajamaki also used the opportunity to publicly speculate on the need for new law offering residency to those who cooperate as witnesses in trafficking investigations.

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